

# ON Stage

VOLUME 7 • ISSUE 2

## STEPHEN HOUGH

HERE FOR THE  
SOI'S AUTUMN 2017  
SEASON, WITH OTHER  
INTERNATIONAL STARS



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Published by Deepak Bajaj for The National  
Centre for the Performing Arts, NCPA Marg,  
Nariman Point, Mumbai – 400021

**Produced by**  
**MW**

**Editorial Office**  
4th Floor, Todi Building,  
Mathuradas Mills Compound,  
Senapati Bapat Marg,  
Lower Parel,  
Mumbai - 400013

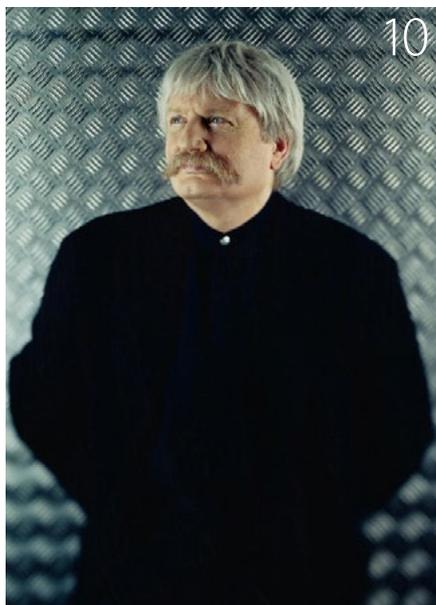
**Printer**  
Spenta Multimedia, Peninsula Spenta,  
Mathuradas Mill Compound,  
N. M. Joshi Marg, Lower Parel,  
Mumbai – 400013

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# Contents



## Features

08

### Reflections

On the role of the CBFC. *By Anil Dharker*

10

### Music that Moves

Sir Karl Jenkins returns to the NCPA to lead the Symphony Orchestra of India at the Indian premiere of his exciting new composition, *The Universe*. The celebrated Welsh composer and conductor talks to *Beverly Pereira* about his genre-defying classical music

14

### Piano Man

Stephen Hough's piano-playing is enhanced by his work as a composer, writer, painter, cultural blogger, activist, poet, novelist and professor of music. *By Karishma Attari*

18

### István Várdai

An interview with the Hungarian cellist



22

**Dan Zhu**

An interview with the Chinese violinist

26

**Wandering with Jayadev**

Jayadev's *Gita Govinda* has a unique place in Sanskrit literature; no poetic work before it was so beautifully connected with music. *Neela Bhagwat* explains the significance of *ashtapadis* in the repertoire of the Gwalior tradition

30

**Weaving Together Jheeni**

By exploring the poems of Kabir, Chokhamela and Janabai in song and dance, *Shruthi Vishwanath* and *Sanjukta Wagh* have come up with a performance that provides fodder to the spiritual traveller

34

**The Father's Story**

Naseeruddin Shah is going to be at the Experimental Theatre, every day, for one month, with his latest production – *The Father*.  
By *Rinky Kumar*

38

**Photography at the NCPA**

We talk to *Mukesh Parpiani*, Head – Photography and Piramal Gallery

42

**Reimagining Classics**

The past month has seen the debuts of a rousing *Hamlet*, in the form of opera, and a scintillating *The Mastersingers of Nuremberg*, with Wagner as the lead. By *Ashutosh Khandekar*

44

**Folk writing vis-a-vis Urban**

*Mani Kaul* explores folk writing and urban writing through the prism of Vijaydan Detha's works and his own films

46

**Programme Guide**

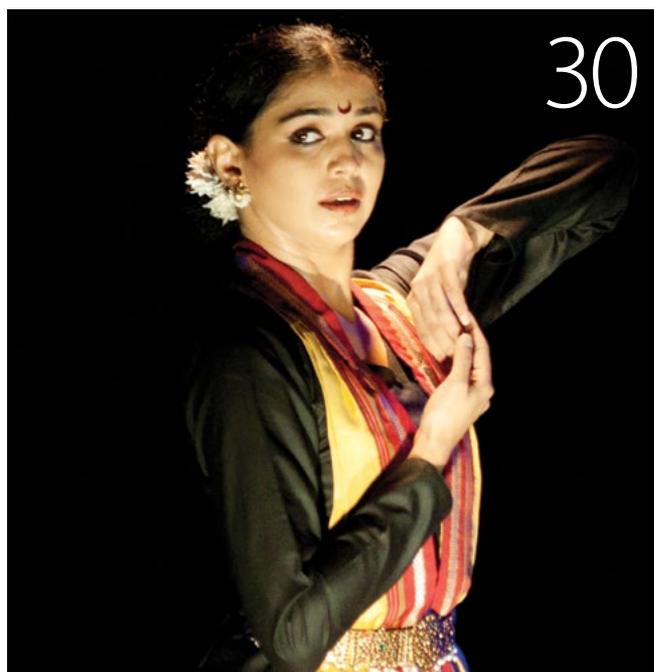
All of September's events at the NCPA

56

**What's Next**

What to look forward to in the coming months

30

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# Piano Man

Stephen Hough's piano playing is enhanced by his work as composer, writer, painter, cultural blogger, activist, poet, novelist, and professor of music. **By Karishma Attari**

Stephen Hough is a British-born, internationally acclaimed pianist, who needs little introduction in classical music circles. His major accolades suggest his mastery of the piano is beyond contest. He was the first classical performing artiste to win a MacArthur genius grant in 2001, and has been honoured as Commander of the Order of the British Empire by Queen Elizabeth II in 2014. He has performed sold-out recitals across the globe, including in Chicago, Hong Kong, London, New York (Carnegie Hall and Lincoln Center), Paris, Boston, and San Francisco. He teaches music, and is on the faculty of Juilliard.

Hough has a solid body of work behind him in the form of recorded albums and composed pieces. He has composed works for orchestra, choir, chamber ensemble and solo piano. His *Mass of Innocence and Experience* and *Missa Mirabilis* were respectively commissioned by and performed at London's Westminster Abbey and Westminster Cathedral. He has also been commissioned by the musicians of the Berlin Philharmonic, the Gilmore Foundation, London's National Gallery, Wigmore Hall, the Louvre and Musica Viva Australia among others. Several of his 50 recorded albums have been awarded international prizes.

However, for all the emphasis that is put on recognising specialisation and celebrating individual genius, he is perhaps best understood as one in a long tradition of renaissance artistes. He has been named by *The Economist* and *Intelligent Life* as one of 20 living polymaths. It is a fair leap to suggest that his insightful playing is enhanced by his work as composer, writer, painter, renowned cultural blogger, queer activist, award-winning poet, novelist, and professor of music. When the December 2016 issue of *Musical America* recognised him as 'International Artist of the Year', it was for being not just a thinking musician, but "a kind of philosopher king whose demesne is all of art, and therefore, of life".

In conversation with *The Wall Street Journal's* Stuart Isacoff, Hough expresses how composing music for orchestra, choir, and solo piano is a different experience from playing the piano. Both are visceral and while they are complementary, composing music somehow seems the more intimate experience. He says, "I love the physical feeling of playing the piano. But... composing... seems the most personal of all, because it is making something out of nothing. It's an incredible feeling. It's the difference, I suppose, between being a foster parent and having your own flesh and blood child. There is no less love - some foster parents are the most heroic and wonderful possible. But I imagine it is different for a woman to see the actual child coming out of her body. You can't match that."

### The seeds are sown

Hough's interest in the piano began early, from the time he was five, and taking piano lessons in Heswall (then Cheshire) in Britain. Much pleading led to him convincing his parents to buy a second-hand piano for 5 pounds from an antique shop. His love for the piano must have been immediate as is his continuing awe of it, as he states in an interview with *Huffington Post's* Brian Horay. "It's an orchestra in the hands of one player. It can whisper, roar, and everything in between."

Hough went on to study at the Chetham's School of Music, and then at the Royal Northern College of Music. These early experiences went some way towards shaping his understanding of the role of a professional pianist. He expresses his gratitude towards his teacher Gordon Green at the Northern Royal College of Music in his interview with Isacoff. "Gordon Green was the opposite of a 'competition' teacher," he recalls. "He wanted you to make mistakes, experiment, go off in weird directions. When you enter competitions, you are immediately restricted. You have to play in a correct way; you worry if the jury will like you. Pianists who enter competitions have stopped having fun by the time they are 20 - they become old and stunted."

Stephen Hough



This early exposure to the value of individual expression meant that he had a certain artistic and personal approach to competitions. It would bring him a surprising degree of composure when he played at the Naumburg International Piano Competition, in 1983, while a student at Juilliard. He remembers being largely unprepared and very relaxed, to the extent that he asked someone to keep his coffee warm in the cafeteria before going up to the concert hall and playing his piece. It is Hough's claim that this relaxed attitude led him all the way to the Carnegie Hall stage in the finals.

**"The piano is an orchestra in the hands of one player. It can whisper, roar, and everything in between"**

Hough went on to finish a master's degree from Juilliard, where his studies were assisted by the receipt of the first ever Royal Philharmonic Society Julius Isserlis Scholarship for study abroad.

### An extensive repertoire

As a pianist, Hough is clearly intent on keeping experimentation alive and maintains an extensive repertoire. The variety of his programming may have him playing pieces by Mozart, Beethoven, and Schubert, but also salon pieces and late-Romantic music. His fluency and technical finesse apart, he brings an idiomatic authority to his pieces, without settling into a particular characteristic style. A reflective musician, he balances the precision of his playing with warmth and emotional interpretations.

His bias for the subjective is revealed in a personal essay for *The Guardian*, where Hough discusses his favourite performer of all time. He is inspired by Alfred Cortot's playing, because he sees in it a vision beyond the academic or the theatrical. "Cortot is sometimes referred to as the pianist who played lots of wrong notes. This is unfair, not just because he had a dazzling finger technique, but because he never allowed a striving for accuracy to distract him from the bigger picture. You can sometimes hear his mistakes, even in the first notes of pieces, but I find these fallible moments endearing: the pianist consumed by spiritual inspiration, oblivious of the physical risks involved."

The awareness of a bigger picture remains at the forefront of Hough's work. Perhaps this is what gives him, typically, positive critical reviews for his concerts, where he is celebrated "for channelling Beethoven". His talk, titled 'The Practice of Practising', part of a BBC Radio 3 interview, suggests the discipline, self-examination, and forensic scrutiny he puts into his preparation in order to turn notes on a page into an effortless performance. He keeps in mind his teacher Gordon Green's dictum, "In practice, a perfectionist, in performance, a realist." He also warns against the subtle dangers of practice - "Firstly not to play as if you're onstage, filling the hours crashing through pieces without improvement. But the second, to get stuck in a practising mode."

As a soloist, recitalist, and chamber musician, Hough has appeared with the world's most famous orchestras, on the most illustrious stages, and worked with the most renowned musicians. A two-evening programme brings him to the NCPA this month with familiar favourites by Beethoven, Mozart, Debussy, and Schumann. An opportunity to listen to Hough is one that classical music lovers in Mumbai should not miss. ■

*Stephen Hough will perform in solo recital on 26th September at the Tata Theatre and with the Symphony Orchestra of India on 28th September at the Jamshed Bhabha Theatre.*

# Folk writing vis-a-vis urban

*ON Stage* brings you excerpts from the *NCPA Quarterly Journal*, an unsurpassed literary archive that ran from 1972 to 1988 and featured authoritative and wide-ranging articles. **Mani Kaul** explores folk writing and urban writing through the prism of Vijaydan Detha's works and his own films

Folk material for me is not just a distortion of classical culture; its function (rather than its origin) is well-entrenched in the environment from where it springs. Folk literature is unlike present-day urban literature, which is in keeping with or in revolt against classical culture. And, it is difficult to reduce folk literature to any 'humanistic' generalities. In fact, since it is devoid of such 'serious human realism' in its treatment of problems, folklore sometimes appears childish to educated minds.

The thematic (or the ideological) aspect of folklore undergoes varying stresses of sociological change, and yet, its formal structure not only manages to remain constant but relevant to the changing ideas it contains. Concepts and events, which would be one personal mass of expression in an urban poem, can suffer and even lose their entity within its three translations; the notion of scheme in such a poem is not distinct from its chronological order. Whereas in folk material, the horizontal axis is impermanent, the axis of events being placed in a chronological order; while the events by themselves, being reducible to a more undebatable dialectic (such as man:woman; east:west; up:down; inside:outside), are placed in the vertical schematic axis. Each is superimposed exactly upon the other.

After working on two films (*Uski Roti* and *Ashad Ka Ek Din*), which were based on middle-class urban literature, I was introduced to folk material through the writings of Vijaydan Detha (who works in the village of Borunda, near Jodhpur in Rajasthan). Before I proceed to explain my own cinematic preoccupation, it must be immediately admitted that half of the possibilities I have explored in connection with the film (*Duvidha*) would have remained latent had I encountered folk material in its original form. The writings of Detha intuitively integrate (rather articulate) both the earthly authenticity of the



Facing page and here: Stills from Vijaydan Detha's *Dohri Zindagi*

narration (in the sense of performance) and the original structural relations between the events.

What perhaps baffles and upsets an urban reader is the basic impossibility, the incredibility of the physical reality that Detha uses so as to arrive at a commonplace, actual experience. A careful study of his works will reveal that this extra-physical phenomena (of ghosts, etc.) is resolved neither by belief nor by disbelief; but it is resolved by a third answer such as would make belief/disbelief redundant. This leads him to treat that incredible physical situation in the most natural way possible and, fortunately for him, it enables his writings to escape the burden of two stilted extremes: the one, where a

particular natural image, in its attempt to be realistic, has no 'inner dimension', and the other, where a general unreal image overloads itself with symbolic meanings and fails to 'live'. In essence, an impossible question that does not contain an answer would be resolved by neither accepting the statement nor rejecting it, but by providing an answer that no longer contains the question.

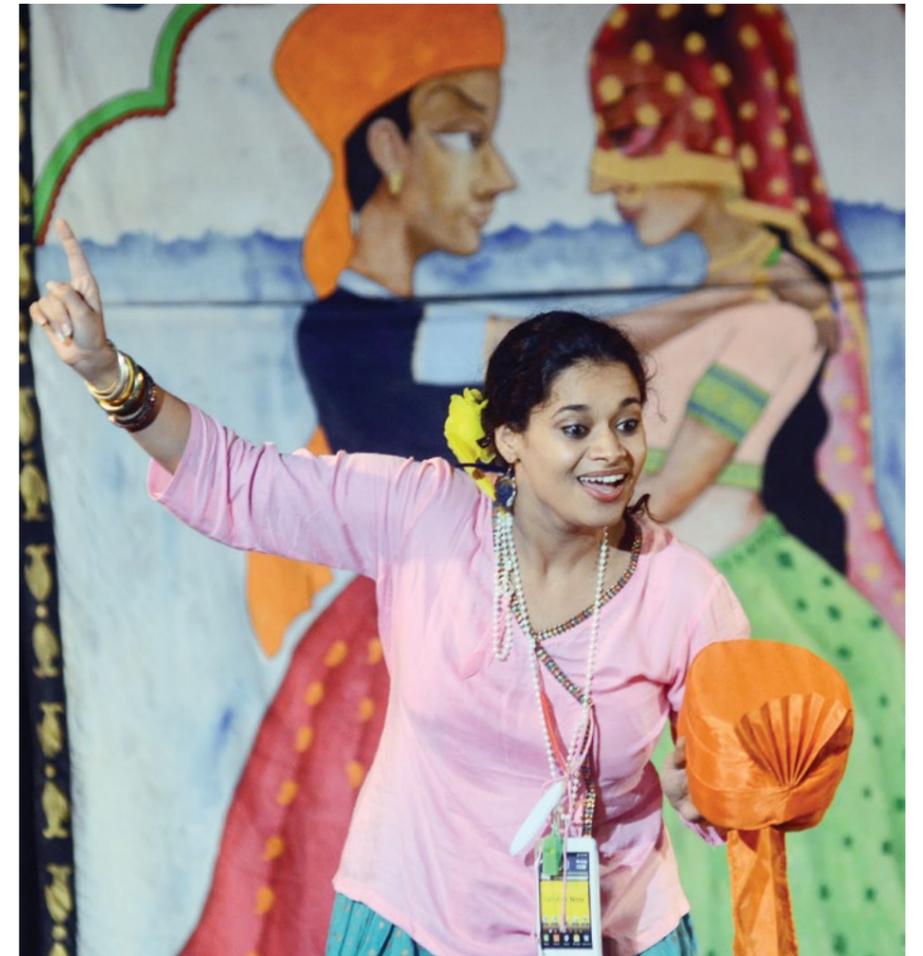
This may lead us to presuppose that in such a situation the relationship between the question and the answer ceases to exist. In a sense, this is true. But whenever a question is answered, it implies that the answer has satisfied the question and the experience of the subject who faces such an answered question would also be of

one of satisfaction, emotional or intellectual. This satisfaction acquires the nature of play, where infinite questions are resolved by infinite answers and the progress made, in the realm of understanding, confines itself to the known. Therefore, whenever the question has not been seemingly answered or satisfied by the answer, it is possible that the answer might actually displace the question. Here the activity no longer remains a play; in fact, it amounts to a transformation. The subject in whom the question had raised the doubt is not left satisfied on that level but raised a step up to view the level at which it appears curious, so that it no longer applies to him.

The trend in urban art forms not to answer questions and merely to state the problem perhaps arises from this need to transform the subject, rather than satisfy the subject's increasing pool of inertia. We notice that the urban mind begins by arranging the particularities of physical experience and further attempts to arrive at its abstracted (subtler, non-physical, intellectual) forms; whereas the folk mind constructs from an already abstract material and reaches, mainly through performance, the anguish of particularity. For Detha, the material becomes complex – his folk background provides him with an unreal structure, and his contemporary sensibility cannot help but want to reveal realistic meanings. The contradiction between the unreal and the real stretches itself into his method, to arrive finally at one experience: where the cessation of all contradictory movements is the proof of understanding. In fact, the non-availability of a proof presupposes the existence of contradictory things.

## RISE TO MAJOR EXPRESSION

Oppression is the unresolved state of tension that gives rise to major expression in man. The authenticity of expression seems to emerge in proportion to the degree in which oppression is imperative to the subject. Perhaps one of the first examples found of this oppressor-oppressed relationship is the bison and the caveman. The caveman painted the oppressor (bison) in its might and



The writings of Vijaydan Detha intuitively integrate both the earthly authenticity of the narration and the original structural relations between the events

power, crouching and attacking, in order to bring it ritually under his control. The act of painting itself was the measure of his control. It did not matter to him if his fellow-hunter had superimposed another painting on his own. The subject of his ritual was the bison: it meant life or death to him.

In my films, the problem becomes two-fold. Firstly, there is, of course, the social environment of the city and the village (*Uski Roti*) or the court and the valley (*Ashad Ka Ek Din*), plus the male

dominance that extensively oppresses women in India. The other and more complex element is the subjective problem of the woman herself, who is being laid waste by her own idealism and who will not accept the relationship with her male as being oppressive. This element, her own choice, or rather her obstinacy (which may even stem from ignorance), creates a visible column of strength in her person. It is in the face of such horrible exploitation of this innocence, leading up to an end that embraces a series of tragic fragments, that the need for transformation emerges on our sensibility. Some of my colleagues would have me believe that the end of this tragic life (which is not even death) is incomplete and a transformation of the woman must be shown in the film: she must revolt. I myself fail to see the connection – it is not the character on celluloid that needs a transformation; it is the audience that must be transformed, even in a little measure.

*This article first appeared in the NCPA Quarterly Journal in March 1973 (Vol. II, No. 1).*